

## How can BTEC teachers support young people to be prepared for careers in the media industries? A reflection on pedagogy

Victoria Grace Walden

### Abstract

There are major discrepancies between the skills required in the media industries, and those BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) Level 3 students develop during their course. While academics have described these courses as ‘pre-vocational’, there is an expectation from students, parents and now the Government that BTECs, which are more practical than A Levels, will offer young people preparation for employment. However, there are distinct differences in the skills required by the media industries and those taught on such courses. While pre-existing literature acknowledges this issue in part, it does not offer potential pedagogical solutions. Recent reforms in vocational education will effect at policy level but offer little practical support for teachers. This action research project proposes potential teaching and learning strategies to help narrow the gap between BTEC media education (one of the most popular courses perceived to be vocational in the United Kingdom) and the skills particularly of high demand in today's industries. The project was organised as part of a Twenty-First Century Learning Alliance teacher research fellowship, which enables teachers to investigate problems that affect their own classroom practice.

### Aims

The aims of this project were to identify the skills gap between BTEC teaching and the media industries to assess the extent to which these skills are currently addressed in BTEC teaching in my institution and to design pedagogical solutions to support young people to develop these skills. The public perception of media as a ‘soft’ and a particularly ‘vocational’ subject (but one that does not seem to feed into its relevant industries; Berger, Richard, and Julian McDougall. 2012. “Editorial: What is Media Education for?” *Media Education Research Journal* 3 (1): 5–21., 7) has led researchers and educators to emphasise the academic values of media education at the expense of extensive consideration of what an appropriate vocational pedagogy might look like. While Berger and McDougall rightly argue for the need of a blend between the academic and vocational in media education, specific training for the media industries is still important and should be considered an integral part of BTEC learning. Many teachers who have been trained to teach traditional academic subjects now find themselves teaching BTEC but do not necessarily have vocational-specific training. The Creative Media Production Level 3 BTEC, which this paper discusses, is often perceived by students as a gateway into industry, a sentiment reinforced by elements of the core assessment criteria, which require students to complete a curriculum vitae and career plan for a specific media pathway.

Some of the pre-existing literature does identify the problems of vocational media education. For example, the blurring of the academic and vocational (Buckingham, David. 1995. “Media Education and the Media Industries: Bridging the Gaps?” *Journal of Educational Television* 21 (1): 7–22.); teachers’ criticisms that provision focuses on ‘pushing buttons’ rather than creativity, thus is inadequate for industry (McLuskie 2000. “More Education, Less Training?” *Journal of Media Practice* 1 (2): 103–107, 103); and the failure of The Creative and Media Diploma (Buckingham, David. 2013. “Teaching the Creative Class? Media Education and the Media Industries in the Age of Participatory Culture.” *Journal of Media Practice* 14 (1):25–41.). Such writing does not, however, engage with the questions: What can teachers do to address such issues in their classroom? This project is particularly interested in the question: How can teachers teach BTEC

media in a way that supports students to develop skills they would need to work in related industries?

The originality of this project lies in its pedagogical focus and outcome: to produce and test teaching and learning resources that support teachers to address the skills gap in the classroom. In doing so, it suggests a vocational pedagogy for teachers of BTEC media: a method of teaching that emphasises practice and is distinct from more academic styles. While I acknowledge the significance of educational reforms, these put much pressure on teachers to cope with new changes without offering them support. When I started this project, I had been a lecturer of media and film, teaching a variety of A Level and BTEC courses, for 6 years. I had also spent some time in industry, working for a multimedia publishing company and as a producer for a non-profit film collaborative. It was the discrepancies I identified between my own industry experience, and the teaching and learning I led and observed in BTEC classrooms that inspired me to review this issue. I wanted to investigate what I could do as a teacher to activate productive change in my own practice in order to help students develop the particular skills I had used and observed in industry.

## Method

Action research is ‘a form of enquiry that enables practitioners in every job and walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask “What am I doing? Do I need to improve anything? If so, what? How do I improve it? Why should I improve it?”’ (McNiff, Jean, and Jack Whitehead. 2011. *All You Need to Know about Action Research*. London: Sage., 7). Action researchers work from within an organisation to identify problems relevant to their own practice (or pedagogy in an educational context), they are not outside researchers looking in (8). (Kemmis, Stephen, and Robin McTaggart. 1988. *The Action Research Planner*. Victoria: Deakin University Press., 5) add to this definition by emphasising that action research must be a collective process, but one that is achieved ‘through the *critically examined action* of individual group members’ [emphasis in original]. Before the research can take place, there is a need for initial reflection: to identify the problem, then a process known as the ‘action research spiral’ can commence (9–15). This structure consists of three project stages: planning, acting and observing, and reflection, which then spirals into a repeating pattern (the research is never-ending: a continually reflective process). This project report explains my initial reflections, then groups the planning, action and observation stages together, detailing how the planning informed pedagogy. Then, I discuss the reflection stage of the research by reviewing feedback from participants in the project (teachers and students), before considering its potential legacy as the spiral continues.

## Initial Reflection

The action research structure of the project was a requirement of the Twenty-First Century Learning Alliance fellowship scheme, which offers selected teachers the opportunity to investigate an issue that affects their own practice. At the time this research was performed, I was a sixth form lecturer teaching a range of media courses, but specifically responsible for the development of BTEC Creative Media Production (television and film pathway). I was sharing the teaching of several BTEC classes with a colleague and we frequently encountered repeated issues in our classroom: students’ disinterest in using pre-production paperwork to inform practical work (they rarely completed planning documents before hiring equipment to film or ignored them when filming); students’ ability to meet deadlines and manage their own projects in a coherent manner and students’ frustration with and resistance to independent problem-solving, critical and creative thinking. These were issues I had seen in other classrooms in different institutions too, both those I taught in and those of colleagues. I was particularly concerned because my industry experience had taught me that project

management, problem-solving and critical and creative thinking were crucial skills for succeeding in the media industries. When many of my students aspired to follow a media career, it seemed particularly concerning that these were the very skills that they struggled to develop throughout their studies. My hypothesis that these major skills are important to success in the media industries was supported by a recent Creative Skillset audit of the UK media sector.

A recent Creative Skillset report (2012a. *Creative Industries Council Creative Skillset Skills Group: Report to Creative Industries.*) identifies the major skills gaps across the media industries to be those related to leadership and management. A census (Creative Skillset. 2012b. *Employment Census of the Creative Media Industries*) occupational groups in the UK media industries are production (26%), business management (12%) and editorial, journalism and sport (12%). A further breakdown of 'production' explains that in film, for example, 38% of these jobs are in strategic management, 23% in business management, 15% in production and 14% in creative development. The word 'production' is usually interpreted by students (and some teachers) to mean a hands-on practical activity using equipment to produce a media text. However, in the Skillset report it refers to business management and development: the very skills I had identified as significant to my own experience in industry and rarely developed by our BTEC students.

To verify the significance of my hypothesis and Skillset's data, I performed some small-scale primary research. This consisted of a questionnaire distributed to more than 100 media professionals, to which 23 replied, and a similar questionnaire to students at two different institutions, to which 55 replied.<sup>1</sup> Both surveys were completed anonymously using the online software *SurveyMonkey*. In the questionnaire for professionals only, participants were asked to define their role and were then offered a range of ranking questions to encourage them to identify what skills they thought were most required in industry and which they found new entrants most lacked. They were also offered a final comment box where they could share their thoughts about how media education could better prepare students for industry.

In defining their responsibilities, 48% of the media professionals identified 'project management' and 17% 'business skills and analysis' as significant elements of their current role. Only 30% considered their job 'creative' and 9% 'technical'. The three most important skills for working in the media were identified as 'creative thinking', 'project management' and 'problem-solving', despite the wide range of sectors and jobs represented. The survey also suggested that these same three skills were those that professionals perceived most new recruits to lack. Fifty-two percent also recognised that freelancing was a common working pattern in the media, which emphasises the necessity for business skills because many individuals entering the sector find themselves having to self-manage their work and to source and manage simultaneous contracts. In the comment box, through a variety of phrases, the idea that an understanding of business skills in a media context was crucial reappeared frequently, this was expressed in terms of 'work experience', 'real-life projects', more 'hands on practical work/experience', 'working to deadlines', 'entrepreneurship' and 'business skills'.

In contrast to the media professionals' responses, students believed that the dominant needs in related industries are 'creative' and 'technical' skills, with 41% and 28% voting, respectively. However, they did identify 'project management' and 'creative thinking' as two of the most needed skills (though further analysis of students' understanding of the term 'creative thinking' during a class discussion revealed that they mostly understood it to mean coming up with a story or design rather than creative problem-solving, thus conflated it simply with the idea of being artistically creative). 'Problem-solving', however, was ranked low and replaced in the top three by 'technical' skills, further highlighting students' perception that the sector requires people who 'push buttons', the expression McLuskie (2000. "More Education, Less Training?" *Journal of Media Practice* 1 (2): 103–107.103) uses in his criticism of vocational training. Students also believed that 'project

management', 'creative thinking' and 'technical' skills are the three areas which they most develop during the BTEC course. From the teaching observation of my colleague and me, this was not evident. Though project management is emphasised in the BTEC Media specification, we noticed that students' execution of related tasks is usually quite poor: they often don't complete work by deadlines, they usually don't use pre-production to inform their practical work and they tend to get legal permissions after filming or not at all.

These surveys offer only a minute representation of media professionals and students in the United Kingdom; however, the results reiterate Skillset's census and my previous concerns about BTEC pedagogy. Business skills are repeatedly highlighted in the Skillset census and my surveys as crucial to success in media industries, and creative thinking, project management and problem-solving were particularly emphasised by the industry professionals. While students mostly agreed with professionals in terms of their perspective of the necessary skills to work in the media, their understanding of these terms and their development of some of these skills in previous teaching scenarios were questionable (in the case of the students I was teaching during the action research project, my previous experience at two other institutions and the experience of colleagues).

This research is particularly timely considering the new requirements of the BTEC qualification, which from September 2014 (just as the application of this action research project was completed) state stricter regulations regarding student submissions. Previously, it had been possible for students to submit incomplete or low-grade quality drafts and get feedback on several subsequent versions until an assignment was of a high standard. From September 2014, the specification at Level 3 states that students are only allowed one draft submission and then a final, with only a small window for re-drafting time. The new regulations emphasise the imperative to ensure BTEC teaching and learning is designed to develop students' project management skills from the outset. If students are expected to submit high-quality work first time, then they must have the skills to work independently, as the BTEC syllabus repeatedly states, 'to a near-professional standard'.

Furthermore, the Wolf Report (Wolf, Alison. 2011. *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*. 32) claims vocational education in general is 'not good enough' and is 'deceiving young people'. The report is one of many investigations that has fed into current Government reforms of vocational education in the United Kingdom. The BTEC Creative Media Production courses are listed as some of the proposed 'tech levels' to start from 2016 (Department for Education. 2014. *2016 16 to 19 Performance Tables: Inclusion of Tech Levels*.). The Government's expectation of such courses is that they prepare students for employment or further study. The reform documentation explains that in the future such courses will require industry involvement in instruction, suggesting that the Government's ambition for courses like the BTEC is that they will particularly support students in accessing employment in the sector to which their training relates (Department for Business Innovation and Skills. 2014. *Getting the Job Done: The Government's Reform Plan for Vocational Qualifications*.). While the BTEC has previously been called a 'pre-vocational course': neither academic enough to prepare students appropriately for Higher Education nor rooted heavily enough in a business context to be of value to industry (Buckingham, David. 1995. "Media Education and the Media Industries: Bridging the Gaps?" *Journal of Educational Television* 21 (1): 7–22.), these Government documents clearly suggest that going forward the BTEC should be considered training to prepare students for employment (or further training). These reforms are informing the development of syllabi, but do not offer teachers practical support in helping prepare students for work in media industries. Rather than taking an action 'from above' approach, as policy changes do, this project acts 'from below' by considering the role teachers can play in narrowing the gap between industry and BTEC education. The next stage of this action research project then was to develop practical strategies teachers, including myself, could adopt in their classrooms to support students to develop the particular skills needed in today's media industries.

## Planning, Action and Observation

Findings from my initial primary and secondary research suggest that the business skills most needed by the media industries in the United Kingdom are under-developed in the learning of BTEC Level 3 students on our, and others' Creative Media Production (film and television pathway) courses. Particular skills to which attention was drawn include 'creative and critical thinking', 'problem-solving' and 'project management'. Recent Government reforms and changes in exam board requirements suggest that there is a growing imperative to particularly focus on these issues. These crucial skills are ones that could be easily addressed by a BTEC teacher without jeopardising adherence to the assessment criteria. These transferable skills could be applied to a range of projects and management skills are specifically required in the mandatory Unit 4: Creative Media Production Management. This is perhaps in contrast to specific skills such as raising funding, another business skill noted by Skillset. Focusing on such a specific skill would distract from the assessment criteria for the course; however, developing students' creative and critical thinking, and problem-solving skills would undoubtedly help them with such a task in the future.

Before saying more about the planning of the pedagogical model, it is useful to share a picture of the cohort which my colleague and I were teaching. The classes were mixed ability with many students who struggled with both written and practical work. The cohort of 24 students, aged between 16 and 25, was divided into two classes: one of 10 students, and the other of 14. Both classes contained individuals with behavioural issues, and many students were resistant to discipline and changes in teaching approaches. There were, however, one or two particularly talented individuals in each class. Generally, students did not meet deadlines, even those who were proficient and keen filmmakers. The cohort was significantly challenging to teach, but many of the students were keen to work in the media, thus it seemed particularly worthwhile to test this approach with them.

To incorporate the development of project management, problem-solving, and creative and critical thinking skills explicitly into a pedagogical model, while still including enough instruction so as to support students through the learning process and to ensure they would meet all assessment criteria, I designed a 6-week scheme of work for an assessment in which students would have to create a 1-minute film for a festival. The project would allow students to meet the assessment criteria for the core Unit 4: Creative Media Production Management and the optional Unit 22: Single Camera Production Techniques. These units assess students' project management skills and their ability to identify, analyse and apply single camera techniques to a production. Unit 4 is a particularly appropriate one with which to test this approach because it specifically assesses the skills I had identified as needing to address. However, the dominance of planning and pre-production in many of the BTEC units also enables this pedagogical model to be adapted more broadly (examples are given at the end of this paper). The 6 weeks were divided into five double lessons (each 1 hour and 40 minutes in total), with one session per day. Each week followed the same pattern, outlined below:

1. Students were expected to complete a flipped classroom activity (such as reading a presentation or watching a video and to complete preliminary tasks that would introduce them to the terminology and issues they needed to understand for the unit). Students were expected to do this in preparation for Monday lessons. They were given 1 week, each time, to complete this.<sup>2</sup>
2. Monday was always a workshop. This would either be a theoretical session, focusing on the elements of Unit 22 which required students to be able to analyse single camera techniques in existing film and television texts, or it would be a practical problem-solving session to help students develop their filming techniques.

3. The lessons from Tuesday through to Friday were structured in the same format and defined as the 'project sessions'. Each lesson began with an abstract creative thinking starter [often taken from, or inspired by, the activities in VanGundy's (2005. *101 Activities for Teaching Creativity and Problem-Solving*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.) *101 Activities for Teaching Creativity and Problem-Solving*]. This was followed by a class discussion during which students were asked to consider how they could apply the thinking from the starter to the problems they faced with their own project. The next stage of the lesson involved students carrying out their own production meetings in the style of a 'scrum' (explained in more detail below). In the early stages of the project, this involved working on a 'project definition' (also explained below). They would review their own progress, set their targets for the session and then work on individual tasks. I would then play the role of the CEO and get a progress report from each group throughout the session. In the final 10 minutes of these lessons, students were asked to complete a personal reflective blog about their progress in which they had to answer three simple questions: What have I done well today? What could I have improved? What will I do before next lesson?<sup>3</sup>

There were several influences from pre-existing research and industry practice that led to the design of this particular structure including Roy Hanney's (2013. "Towards a Situated Media Practice: Reflections on the Implementation of Project-Led Problem-Based Learning." *Journal of Media Practice* 14 (1): 43–59.) writing about project-led, problem-based learning; the application of agile project management in several media industries and VanGundy's (2005. *101 Activities for Teaching Creativity and Problem-Solving*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.) ideas for teaching creative thinking. It is worthwhile reviewing the influence each of these had on the pedagogical model I adopted for this research. Hanney (2013. "Towards a Situated Media Practice: Reflections on the Implementation of Project-Led Problem-Based Learning." *Journal of Media Practice* 14 (1): 43–59.) is wary of teaching strategies that encourage students to learn 'a narrow set of instrumental criteria' based 'largely on competencies', such as their ability to edit or film proficiently. He explains, 'to focus merely on the end result of a project ignores much of what takes place during the process of the project' (44). He suggests that offering students situated learning opportunities where they are exposed 'to the challenges of the *real world*' (47, emphasis in original) is more effective. However, he highlights the importance of retaining the educational context of the classroom (it should not merely become an office), emphasising the need for an instructional framework to the learning process (50).

Hanney's thinking influenced my approach in two ways: firstly, it encouraged me to adopt a simulation of the work environment in the classroom. Students worked in small production teams and organised daily meetings in which they would regularly brainstorm ideas and consider developments of their projects together. Furthermore, their project was a live brief (to some extent). They were given the regulations and deadline of a real film festival. Secondly, Hanney's caution that situated learning must not simply become working practice without an educational framework led me to ensure I had an instructional strand in my pedagogical approach. Every Monday would be set aside for learning key concepts and techniques in workshop style sessions. This structure somewhat mimics apprenticeship-style education with a work-like environment 4 days of the week and classroom-style learning the other.

Hanney also suggests the use of particular documents to allow students to review their progress during the project, including a project definition (which outlines the project and schedule); project proposal (detailed overview of the final project with a clear solution) and then a project initiation document (in which students' ideas are fixed for reference during later review stages). Then, he notes, project review meetings can return to these documents and continue to evaluate the progress of the project (Hanney, Roy. 2013. "Towards a Situated Media Practice: Reflections on the Implementation of Project-Led Problem-Based Learning." *Journal of Media Practice* 14 (1): 43–59.).

Hanney's approach suggests a student-centric learning space, which enables independent development and responsibility, modelling industry practice. The number of documents involved in his early stages of development is likely to confuse sixth form students working on small-scale projects (he writes with undergraduates in mind). However, the concept of a project definition seemed incredibly productive in the BTEC setting and would enable students to translate the Pearson-Edexcel specification (Pearson. 2010. *Creation Media Production Level 3 Specification*.) into a coherent brief. Ted McCain (2005. *Teaching for Tomorrow: Teaching Content and Problem-Solving Skills*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.) offers a useful template which I adapted for this purpose. While Pearson-Edexcel stipulate detailed project briefs should be supplied to students, I experimented by giving our cohort the original exam board specification (written primarily for teachers) and a general outline of the task: 'create a one-minute film on the theme 'journey' for an upcoming student film festival'. After the activity, students still had access to the official brief required by the exam board, but by creating a project definition, they were able to clearly identify how their tasks related to assessment criteria.

To start, students needed to consider what tasks they must complete in order to meet the exam board's criteria for pass, merit and distinction. Then, they had to design a feasible schedule for each group of related tasks (i.e. research, pre-production, production, etc.) based on the commitments of each team member. It was quite common for students within this particular cohort to be studying another BTEC subject such as drama, dance or photography that demanded large amounts of work to be completed outside of contact hours. Often students felt overloaded by deadlines. Therefore, giving them the opportunity to identify all the necessary tasks at the beginning of the project and decide their own deadlines, except for the final submission date, enabled them to take responsibility for their work, and to learn how to manage their schedules effectively. This also created a culture of accountability where students could see where they went wrong and could address time management issues regularly. To ensure students were working to the correct standards, their project definition documents were marked with feedback given in written and verbal form.

To integrate professional practice into the classroom, I moved beyond the proposal definition concept outlined by Hanney and turned towards project management models. The BTEC specification mentions the notion of scrums in Unit 4; therefore, I investigated how these were implemented in industry. Carroll (2012. *Agile Project Management*. Leamington Spa: In Easy Steps.) situates scrums within what is known as the agile project management model, designed to deal with projects (such as those common in the media) that regularly change or are on-going (i.e. never have an end product, such as the maintenance of online media). Agile project management promotes flexibility and collaboration and scrums, influenced by rugby terminology, are the regular team meetings that enable such projects to run smoothly (14). The approach Carroll suggests is characterised by the following stages:

1. A product backlog document is created which establishes all of the 'sprints' (or chapters) of the project's evolution (i.e. research, pre-production, etc.) and identifies priorities and potential deadlines.
2. The product backlog is broken down into individual sprint backlog documents to keep the project focused and manageable. Here, responsibilities, completion status of tasks and deadlines are recorded.
3. Daily scrums are held to review the backlog documents. Tasks may be re-evaluated: are they necessary? Do deadlines need to be changed? What is preventing a task being completed (i.e. waiting on contact)? What has been completed? What next? The backlog documents are then edited accordingly.



#### 4. Individuals work on their set tasks.

While Carroll (2012. *Agile Project Management*. Leamington Spa: In Easy Steps., 74–75) believes each sprint should not be edited once agreed in the sprint backlog (though the overall product backlog can be changed at each sprint stage), due to the short timescale of the BTEC project (6 weeks), it seemed productive to allow students to make adaptations on a daily basis if necessary, particularly as they were only beginning to learn these techniques. During the scrums, students were encouraged to physically check the status of each other's documents by sharing them during the meeting, thereby offering peer-review and taking responsibility for theirs and their peers' progress. This style of industry practice allowed students to focus on the problem-solving and organisational skills fundamental to sound project management. Thus, the agile project management approach enabled students to simulate real industry practices.

For the purpose of the college's learning walks and lesson observations, it was necessary to keep lessons structured in a traditionally academic manner to some extent with starters, main activities and plenaries. Starters offered an opportunity to train students' creative thinking skills, preparing them to apply these to their project work. An abstract creative thinking exercise (inspired by VanGundy. 2005. *101 Activities for Teaching Creativity and Problem-Solving*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.) was used as a starter for each lesson, followed by the main production work applying the agile project management method, then a reflective plenary for which students were asked to individually reflect on their progress and contribution to the team. This, I felt, helped hone students' creative thinking skills, and the reflective plenary (in the form of a personal blog) reiterated their individual responsibilities and identified their own homework. The reflective blog offered an individual review of the agile project management process, and an opportunity to review the progress of the research project daily.

Overall, from the different professional and pedagogical methodologies I explored, I constructed a pedagogical model that I felt would be productive in developing students' problem-solving, project management, and creative and critical thinking skills: those particularly required in the contemporary media sector. With reflection embedded into every lesson, students were also able to consider how they learned, as well as what they learned. This approach includes: instruction and modelling that is student-centred; real-life scenarios and simulations; agile project management strategies that encourage students to take responsibility for managing their own assignments; and personal reflection and target setting on a daily basis.

#### **Reflection**

The main aim of this project was to develop a pedagogical model appropriate for supporting BTEC students to develop some of the most important skills required by today's UK media industries. After primary and secondary research suggested that 'creative thinking', 'problem-solving' and 'project management' were three of the most significant issues relevant to the media industries that needed, and could be addressed in the BTEC class, I developed the approach discussed above. To evaluate its success, it seemed appropriate, as is characteristic of action research, to turn to the participants of the project to assess students' progress in these particular areas.

Four methods of evaluation helped analyse the success of the scheme of work: grades, student questionnaires and interviews, and teacher interviews. While the research was not primarily focused on academic results, changes in achievement were significant and are worth discussing. In the earlier analysis of initial surveys, I explained that students often did not engage with the necessary link between project planning and production. As observed by my colleague, it was common practice for students to produce pre-production and then disregard it on set, or to get behind with their planning, shoot their film and then fill in pre-production documents afterwards. Both of these are



obviously examples of poor project management. As much of the assessment criteria for Creative Media Production Management and Single Camera Production Techniques relate to pre-production, planning and project management, changes in attainment offer a useful tool for identifying students' improvement in project management skills.

Previously, except a handful of students, the majority of our BTEC cohort struggled with deadlines; there was a common ethos amongst students of 'if I submit half finished work for the draft deadline, I'll get feedback and then can just work on it until the final course (not the unit) deadline'. Perhaps, we were over-zealous in giving feedback that students relied on it too heavily; however, it is not unfeasible to consider such an attitude a trend across the country, since Pearson-Edexcel announced its much stricter policy towards deadlines and submissions in September 2014. Due to students' lacklustre approach to planning and project management, they had mostly received ungraded or pass for previous draft assignments, with only a handful of top performing students attaining a merit on first draft, improving to a distinction after editing. However, after adopting the scrum technique to their single camera production, every student (except three individuals who consistently struggled to achieve a pass grade) attained a borderline merit/distinction in relation to planning and management assessment criteria. This dramatic shift in results was an unexpected, but wonderful additional finding and clearly evidenced the development of students' project management skills, so important to the media industries.

The next forms of evaluation assessed students' feedback. First, weekly questionnaires were made available via the college's virtual learning environment. Unfortunately, as the weeks progressed there was a decrease in responses to the questionnaire, partly due to students' external commitments such as drama rehearsals and examinations, but also due to the unforeseen error on my part of asking for these to be completed at the end of a Friday afternoon lesson. For each section of the class: creative thinking starters, project management and reflection, students were given a series of scale questions, for example 'to what extent (on a scale of 1–10, 10 being the highest) do you engage in the creative thinking starter tasks set each lesson?' It is clear from the questionnaires and from general feedback in class that students did not find the creative starters particularly useful or interesting. They struggled to make connections between abstract thinking and their own projects. The average score for questions in this area dropped below 4 in week 4, though peaked at 7 in week 5, when fewer students responded. However, questions related to project management revealed that the majority of students were engaged, understood and developing confidence in professional project management skills, with responses to questions relating to these issues averaging between 6 and 7 out of 10 each week. In relation to reflection, students continually noted that setting targets helped motivate them, it was useful and they engaged with it. All students identified major positive differences between previous working methods and current practice.

Though the fact that the student questionnaires were distributed on a weekly basis, every Friday afternoon became problematic, and the questionnaires could have tested specific knowledge related to the skills rather than only students' opinions, these data were backed up with more detailed qualitative information in the form of interviews. From the interviews, I discovered that some of the higher achievers, who were skilled in production techniques and relatively organised, were reluctant to work with others. Thus, they were quite resistant to the new procedures introduced. Two of these students seemed to share the attitude of 'if it ain't broke, why fix it'. While, students who usually achieved a pass grade, identified the usefulness in the scrum structure and believed the creative thinking tasks could help stimulate ideas, some found the project definition proposal, the scrum documents and starters to be 'pests' (to quote one student's response). However, this aligns with such students' attitude towards activities throughout the 2-year course: they generally showed signs of not wanting to try new activities and a belief that classroom time should be dedicated solely to allowing them to 'get on with their work' (i.e. without the interruption of paperwork or indeed teacher instruction). Despite this negative attitude from two individuals, most students interviewed

did highlight, at least once, that they found some of the documents useful in helping them to plan. One student particularly mentioned that creative starters were useful on a long college day to help inspire thinking; and that the scrum documents encouraged a strong team ethos and a collaborative process. The same student also expressed that though some of the administrative tasks were not 'entertaining', they were nevertheless 'useful': an honest and important reflection. He also noted that at first the scrums were confusing, but once he understood them better, they were useful. Those students who did participate in regular reflection mostly identified scrums as a useful activity. Further evidence to support the success of the model was provided in a lesson observation report. The observer stated that it was clear that during the class, all students knew exactly what tasks they were doing and what they needed to do next. Undoubtedly, their scrum meetings and self-reflection helped them to identify this.

The accompanying teacher who was interviewed made particularly significant observations about project management and creative thinking. First, he believed the project management activities had been hugely successful. He stated that 'previously, without the documents, it was too easy for student to shy away from responsibility' and that this structure gave them a real ownership of the project. He also expressed that from a teacher's perspective, the scrum documents 'provide tangible evidence to show independent learning and project management' (requirements of the specification). He identified that the model offered students the opportunity to work to industry standards rather than 'hashing pre-production'. He noted, 'One of the biggest problems historically is that students see pre-production as an obligation, rather than useful paperwork which will better inform their work. They often treat it as box ticking, once completed it is filed and done. Working documents help'. The teacher was keen to introduce these strategies from the beginning of the first year with the new cohort starting in September 2014. However, he did identify that not all students bought into the idea of self-reflection, but those who did were able to 'reflect on progress and manage time better'. There was clearly some work to be done in encouraging students to believe in the positive rationale for these new teaching and learning techniques; however, this is to be expected when the cohort was a second year group, who had already been taught in very different ways for a year and a half, and were mostly quite resistant to change.

The teacher, however, was more critical of the creative thinking starters. He stated:

Great idea and I was excited to do them, for those students who wanted to just get on with work the abstract context of some of the questions made it very challenging to engage them. Definitely do creative starters but make the relevance more transparent, i.e. Idea from this term: take your advert and turn it into a multi-channel campaign. More of a direct link between starters and their brief encourages engagement.

Engaging with the spiral structure of action research, we tested the teacher's theory by adapting our pedagogy for the next unit we taught. Teaching Unit 35: Producing Video Installation Work, we used the same lesson structure, but adapted the creative thinking tasks so that they were always relevant to the specific project students were working on. These included a 'location dilemmas' exercise, for which students were given a range of issues related to securing locations and had to consider how they might handle these problems. The disdain students had shown towards the previous, more abstract, starters dissipated and the creative problem-solving with which they started to engage ensured that the majority of groups produced excellent, often intellectual video installations that one might consider of a quality higher than Level 3. This productive engagement resulted in a large proportion of students receiving distinction for their practical installation.

One observation that I particularly shared with my fellow teacher was the emphasis the model took away from practical skills during the initial assignment. While, it has been noted that technical skills are not identified as a skills gap in today's media training and industries (except in the fields of

animation, programming and computer games), they are still an integral part of the Level 3 assessment. Therefore, while students' grades in the Single Camera unit spiked in production and planning, many groups rushed their initial practical piece. It was through our adaptation of the creative thinking tasks for teaching Unit 35: Producing Video Installation Work – sometimes using technical equipment as part of the activity – that the balance between production management and technical skills could be addressed. For example, one starter required students to consider how they could use audio or visual equipment to make their installation space more interactive for spectators. Now practical skills could be workshopped through these creative starters and were directly relevant to the students' projects, enabling them to extend their thinking continually.

The spiral process of the action research structure continued as we integrated these refinements into a live brief for our transitioning students (those moving into the second year in September) in the summer term. The brief involved working with the Ideas Foundation to produce an advertising pitch for a charity project. Once again, these students had previously been unenthusiastic about project planning, but the observations of my colleague and me after we adopted the model explained in this paper showed that this was much improved. Students worked professionally and two individuals, who had previously struggled with organising their projects, were invited to a London advertising company to present their idea to industry professionals and received a highly commended award for their project.

Crucially missing from the reflection stage was an evaluation by industry professionals of the developed pedagogical model. Given the small-scale nature of this research and the time constraints of the project, such coordination was difficult to plan (it would have involved organising times within the 6 weeks when professionals could come and observe teaching). However, there is certainly room for further dialogue between industry and educators to continue to evolve vocational pedagogy.

## **Conclusions**

The application of industry-standard project management processes in the BTEC Level 3 media classroom alongside modelling practice, focused skills-based activities (such as the creative starters) and individual reflection was successful to some extent. This model enabled students to get to grips with the business dimension of the media industries and develop the types of skills much needed in different sectors: from film to television and journalism to multimedia production. Additional benefits of applying this model included: successfully meeting lesson observation criteria; easier classroom management with accountability always levelled to students and documentation to evidence their daily progress; several, previously quite disaffected students deciding to apply for media internship programmes and further vocational training, particularly in business-related scenarios such as marketing and television production management, and a significant improvement in grades.

Two areas for development from the initial project were: the necessity to make the creative thinking tasks more relevant and engaging for students, and the need for a better balance between technical and business skills. These issues were however addressed when the model was adapted for later units and the adaptations made a significant impact on student engagement. This project, naturally, has its limitations. It was a small-scale action research project, and the researcher was situated in the classroom engaging with the strategies, rather than observing practice from an outside perspective. However, as is the nature of action research, I dedicated time daily to analytically reflecting on my experience and observations in the classroom. In spite of these limitations, I hope to have provided a potential pedagogical model that goes some way towards helping young people develop some of the fundamental skills necessary for a career in the media industries. Much more work is needed to develop a rigorous vocational media pedagogy supported with better communication between schools, assessors, colleges and industry. I hope this project also highlights

the usefulness of research-informed teaching practice in the vocational field. As a teacher, at the time this research was performed, I valued the opportunity to reflect on my own practice, and the results were rewarding for me, my colleague and students.

Since the implementation of this project, the resources, including a teacher guidance pack have been uploaded onto the Times Educational Supplement's resource-sharing website (<https://www.tes.co.uk/MyPublicProfile.aspx?uc=4045386>). They have attracted more than 3000 downloads. They have also been shared with teachers from across the United Kingdom at two events held in the British Film Institute, London, and a resource hub (<https://themediabusinessproject.wordpress.com/>) has been created that directs teachers to the downloadable content on TES and provides a blog that talks through the challenges faced during the initial project. These materials serve as the project's legacy, in the hope that other teachers may continue the action research spiral by developing upon this model in their own practice.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Notes**

1. The questionnaires were distributed to students from two different institutions to test the relevance of the research outside of my organisation. These were distributed at different times to keep anonymity but so that I could see if there were any specific differences between the two. The average results were similar proving that there was scope for this research to have relevance beyond the sixth form in which I was working.
2. The flipped classroom technique (the notion of giving students subject information before a lesson that focuses on a particular topic) was used to remove the dominance of teacher-led instruction, enabling the students to have a preliminary idea of the topic before each session so that activities could concentrate on putting their knowledge into practice. I have left out a detailed discussion of this attribution because it is not specifically relevant to vocational pedagogy.
3. The full teaching pack and resources can be found at: <http://themediabusinessproject.wordpress.com/>